DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 363 CS 214 497

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TITLE Giving or Taking Authority: Exploring the Ideologies of Collaborative Learning.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ambiguity; Cooperative Learning; Females; *Feminism; Higher Education; *Ideology; Teacher Role; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Inquiry; *Collaborative Learning; Feminist Pedagogy; *Social Constructivism; Student Empowerment

ABSTRACT

If social constructionism would seem to encourage collaborative learning, it is not hard to understand why feminist instructors would align themselves with this philosophical position. In "Women's Ways of Knowing," however, M. Belenky, B. Clinchy, M. Goldberger and J. Tarule present quite different feminist justifications for collaborative learning. "Connected teachers"--the kind most appropriate for women students--"try to create groups in which members can nurture each other's thoughts into maturity." While social constructionists and the authors of "Women's Ways of Knowing" both ask students to see themselves as authorities and both lead students to construct new knowledge, the first suggest collaborative activity should center around conflict, and the others suggest it should center on connection. The difficulty with the latter view is that it could be construed to advocate female passivity; the only safe classroom for women would be one that invites critique and engagement. How can the instructor allow the uneasiness that will inevitably arise through conflict and still ensure that students feel that they can speak honestly and passionately? One way would be to make a place for ambiguity in the classroom. If students can acknowledge that constructing new truths takes time, they need not push for closure in discussions. According to "Women's Ways of Knowing," ambiguity is helpful to the woman student. (TB)

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Phyllis Mentzell Ryder

# Giving or Taking Authority:
# Exploring the Ideologies of Collaborative Learning

ED 373 363

After I had taught composition for many years, I came across Women's Ways of Knowing and I was delighted to have such a clear rational for a new type of classroom. Since I was convinced to use collaborative groups in my writing classrooms, I quickly sought those places in the book which advocated small group work, and I developed (less quickly!) an article in which I justified how collaborative groups would help women in each of the epistemological positions set up in the book.

I sent off my article, had it returned, rewrote it extensively, and had it returned again. One of the reviewers pointed out that while not many articles had used Women's Ways of Knowing to advocate the teaching styles I wanted to promote, the teaching styles themselves were not anything new. People have advocated student-centered, collaborative-based writing classrooms for some time. In 1984, for example, Kenneth Bruffee suggested that we turn to "a form of indirect teaching in which the teacher sets the problem and organizes the students to work it out collaboratively" (638). The reviewers' words have been working their way around in my head for several years now, and as I have read more about collaborative theory, I am struck by the way my initial response to Women's Ways of Knowing has bubbled up slowly in the field, and I am becoming more and more critical of my initial stance. Admittedly, my first response to the reviewers was pretty hostile; with time, however, I am able to see those reviewers as collaborators and their advice has helped me evaluate my understandings and my arguments Because of their help, I have arrived at a new position. While I admire the move to find a more feminist pedagogy, one which considers the epistemological development of women students, I worry that the ways we have adapted Women's Ways of Knowing to collaborative theory and the ways we have adapted

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collaborative theory to Women's Ways of Knowing are undermining a greater feminist potential.

Let me start by classifying what I see as several of the goals set out by advocates of collaborative learning. Donald Stewart reminds us that collaborative learning is the pedagogical daughter of Composition's ideological shift towards social construction. While most authors clarify ways that collaborative learning will improve students' writing, I would argue that in addition, most are also social constructionists who hope that implementing collaborative learning will achieve an ideological goal. First, they hope to teach a redefinition of "knowledge" which is aligned with their view. Since social constructionists believe that reality and meaning are not external to people but are in fact constructed through "agreements" among people, they want to use the classroom to present this view. They want to use collaborative learning because it models this view of knowledge. When students work together to construct answers, they enact the social constructionist epistemology. Ultimately, the goal is not only to make students aware of the social constructionist position, but to move students through various levels of resistance until they see the world as socially constructed and see themselves as part of the group which constructs "reality" and "meaning." For rhetorical theorists, viewing the world as socially constructed is especially appealing because the world can be defined as rhetorically constructed: whenever we negotiate meaning, we use rhetoric.

While this abstract description may not appear too unsettling for the status quo, the implications of social construction theory go much farther. An underlying result is a new framework from which students can begin to critique the social structures around them. For Paulo Freire, for example, as students recognize their contributions to their culture, they gain a "deepening awareness of the social forces and relations of power that shape their immediate experience" (Trimbur 93).

Recognizing that they play a part in constructing their world, Freire's Brazilian peasants begin to see that they can also play a part in reconstructing it. If we are stuck looking at the world as fixed, and seeing our positions in the world as "natural," we see no point in challenging that world. However, if we view knowledge and reality as socially constructed, we suddenly have some control and can admit a possibility for change.

In the United States, Karen Lefevre tells us, viewing the world as socially constructed threatens the myth of the individual, a myth upon which the country's economical and p[illegible]tical apparatus rest. From Rags-to-Riches stories to the Republican rhetoric about single mothers on welfare, we see how much stock is put in the belief that a "good" individual is self-contained and self-reliant, that a good, hard-working person should be able to move up the economic ladder if she or he wants it bad enough. If a person does not get ahead in the U.S., we can blame the individual. However, if we look at an individual's choices and options within a larger context--when we examine what choices are allowed for whom, what "agreements" are made about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior for certain individuals--we upset that picture of the individual. Suddenly the larger systems come under scrutiny.

For social constructionists, then, collaborative learning involves putting students in collaborative groups and asking them to reach consensus in various tasks: we ask them to speak and write with each other until they have constructed a joint view of an issue. In this way, the students enact this way of knowing and recognize their role as agents creating knowledge. In addition, social constructionists advocate collaborative learning because it re-defines the role of the teacher so that he or she does not represent Truth. When the instructor asks students to work in groups, he or she gives up the position as The Authority. In an ideal social construction classroom, the instructor develops assignments and grading

collaboratively with the students, again demonstrating that knowledge (and rules) are developed through consensus. Finally, the teacher makes these processes explicit, emphasizing the social and rhetorical nature of "reality" and leading students to view their world critically.

If we accept this final premise, then it is not hard to see why feminists should and do advocate collaborative learning. For one thing, it allows us to recognize that gender roles are constructed and not natural, a foundation of feminist thought. Equally important, it is a pedagogical tool that offers students a way to critique the ways various "agreements" have been made in our society. In order to ensure that collaborative learning achieves this feminist goal, however, we need to make the process of "consensus" visible. We cannot only use collaborative learning groups, we have to structure them so that the groups recognize what they are doing. We have to construct activities that will demonstrate the rhetorical "agreements" the students have made and compare that process to the types of agreements made outside the classroom. We must point out when discussions end in consensus and when they end in compromise, and we must elicit discussion on that: how often in our society do we reach consensus; whose views are most often compromised? For example, if we accept the premise of Gilligan and the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing, women in collaborative groups may tend to be mediators who ensure that everyone speaks and who compromise their own beliefs to preserve group unity. As feminists, we need to monitor the groups, call attention to the function of compromise, and use the occasion as the foundation for a closer look at compromise and consensus in our "democratic" society.

These criteria ensure that the collaborative experience itself will raise feminist issues. Some might worry that the class will "disintegrate" into a a course on feminism rather than one on writing. It is true that the classroom will change; discussions of who have the power to affect national agreements on "knowledge"

will make the classroom explicitly political. However, the concerns of feminist and rhetorical studies are not at odds: both wonder who has the power to speak, who is forced to listen, how groups reach consensus, and how people phrase opinions in order to effectively reach people of different opinions.

Having considered this overview of how social constructionists might use collaborative learning, I returned to my thoughts about Women's Ways of Knowing. The reasons I had for advocating collaborative learning then were quite different. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule had convinced me that collaboration was important as a way to ensure a more equitable teaching environment. Women, in their view, prefer collaborative work because it invites connection. Collaborative learning enacts a premise that the authors say is essential for women students: "for women, confirmation and community are prerequisites rather than consequences of development" (194). When we ask students to work in small groups, we give them the authority and ensure them that we trust they have worthwhile things to contribute. The authors tell us that the "connected teacher"--the kind most appropriate for women students--"tries to create groups in which members can nurture each other's thoughts into maturity" (221). The best peer groups are ones where the students know each other personally; otherwise, criticism may be found "hurtful but not helpful" (222). In particular, the authors tell us that the

> connected class constructs truth not through conflict but through 'consensus.' [The original meaning of 'consensus' ] was 'feeling or sensing together,' implying not agreement necessarily, but a 'crossing of the barrier between ego and ego,' bridging private and shared experience (223).

While I am all for providing an environment where women students will learn best, I am struck by how different this collaborative activity is from the one I

had set up according to the social constructionist model. While both ask students to see themselves as authorities, and both lead students to construct new knowledge, one suggests that the collaborative activity will center around conflict, and the other suggests that the collaborative activity should center around connection. If what I posited earlier is true--that is, if collaborative learning must make visible the negotiations involved, and if part of the discussion must incorporate questions of power, of who gives in to compromise or how we reach consensus--then, I wonder, would it be possible to have these discussions in the kind of collaborative group which Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule have described? Can a group which is set up specifically to provide a supportive environment for the participants also recognize and confront differences of opinion and power?

I think that we can have groups that are both supportive and able to work with conflict, but I agree with Susan Jarratt that so far the discussions of student-centered pedagogy have assumed that "safe" classrooms are also "conflict-free" classrooms. Furthermore I worry, as Jarratt does, that we have not fully considered the ways that pushing for conflict-free classrooms might hurt women students. Consider Jarratt's example: "Heterosexual male students read aloud personal narratives about sexual conquest [while] women and other male students remain silent" (105). In this case, it seems to me, the only "safe" classroom for women is one where the teacher and other students are encouraged to voice their critiques of the essays' content.

When I consider what is essential to an environment which is both feminist and safe, I think it's important to recognize that any classroom which is set up to challenge the status quo is bound to raise anxiety in the students. Designing a course which challenges the traditional epistemological position that Truth is out there, something which teachers can pass on to students, means we are bound to meet some resistance. If we further design a course which calls into question the

myth of individual self-reliance--that is, if we design a course where students work together to write essays and are dependant on each other to construct new understandings--we are bound to meet more resistance. David Bleich, for example, describes the frustration his students felt when their exploration of social inequities pushed them up against individualist notions. When they could not combat social inequities without giving up the idea of individual self-reliance, students were angry at each other for having raised questions which led to their discomfort.

I think that this kind of discomfort is healthy: whenever we have to challenge a notion of ourselves and our worlds, we are left feeling a bit queazy and unsure of our footing. Like bell hooks and Susan Jarratt, I don't think we can teach well without some of this. If we are going to teach a socially constructed view of writing, if we are going to emphasize the struggles and importance of constructing our world through language, then we have to embrace this kind of uneasiness.

How can we allow this uneasiness and still ensure that students feel that they can speak honestly and passionately? I would like to propose that we take the social constructionist view to its limit and acknowledge, as we speak and as we listen, that all views of the world are up for negotiation, and that shifting our views takes a long time. Doing so will aid the classroom in several ways. First, there is a place for ambiguity. If we acknowledge that constructing new "truths" personally and collectively takes time, we can have discussions without pushing for closure. We can confront difficult issues without the pressure to resolve. While this may appear to conflict with the need to reach consensus, in fact the move allows us to examine our positions and decide whether consensus is possible at that moment. We can ask, "Is this a moment where we can agree to hear each other, or is this a moment where we can combine our views and push to yet another, joint way of seeing the issue?" Another advantage is that the agreement to tolerate ambiguity is one of the criteria Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule present as helpful for women

students. They write, "In a connected class, no one apologizes for uncertainty. It is assumed that evolving thought will be tentative" (221).

How do we set up such a framework? I begin my first year composition classes each year with an exercise which I call "I Believes." I come into class with a list of concepts which I believe, and I pass them around for students to read aloud. Later, students write their own lists. My list is long and detailed, because in it I try to demonstrate that one's understanding of the world is a constant process of examining personal experiences and evaluating one's own view in relation to new experiences or other people's views. In addition, I want to demonstrate to my students that, by the same token, good writing weaves together abstract ideas with concrete examples. Early in my list is this sequence:

> *I believe* that truth is something we arrive at slowly, something we arrive at, live in, and discard. So many of the truths that I grew up with, which felt so overpoweringly true and right, have been tossed aside like old nightgowns. I believed that if, after school, I fed the rabbits and geese before the frigid twilight of New Hampshire winter, chopped five big armfuls of wood for the kitchen stove, and baked cookies for my sister's senior class bake sale, my father would fly home from Egypt, my mother would drop her daily, excessive community work, and I wouldn't be lonely. It was a truth that served me well for a year. It was a truth I am glad I discarded.
>
> *I believed* that the married poet at the Winter Workshop understood love as I did, as something you offered to one treasured person (preferably your spouse) at a time. That truth was confused when he slept with a friend of mine, a young woman who looked great in my grandfather's grey sweater. That truth was shattered when, an hour after she left for the airport, he put his palms on my breasts and suggested I write poetry of love. *I believe* that it is naive to project my notion of truth on another.
>
> *I believe* that there are no ultimate, final "truths," that eventually all truths will be changed, that a century from now we will no longer value what we now value, that we will see

> history in a new way, that we will have so much more information available to us that we will consider the truths of the 1990s mundane, out of date, discriminatory, innocent.
>
> *I believe* that it is not merely rude but profoundly immoral to enter a room without any intention of hearing what others in the room have to say. I must go into every conversation willing to have my perspectives changed.
>
> That last belief is false: Outside the Library a women sat cross-legged near a sign that said "What the Wildcat has Censored." Always curious about local news, and ready to acknowledge that all editorial boards--especially of school papers--suppress information, I took the yellow pamphlet from the woman's raised arm. "Holocaust was a hoax" the headline read. My stomach knotted. I skimmed the piece to see if it was a joke, a sick joke of some kind that would reveal itself in the third or fourth paragraph. No. I dropped the flier in the nearest trash can. On the way home, I tuned the radio so I could hear Eli Wiesel speak at the opening of the National Holocaust Museum.
>
> So I am wrong about the "shifting truth" thing. There are too many things I will not put up for question. I will not engage in an open, exposed, vulnerable, respecting conversation with someone who denies the Holocaust. I might pretend to, in order to convince the woman in front of the library, the woman who will not look at my face as she hands me this pamphlet, the woman whose face is stiff with anger, but I will not enter that dialogue with any intent of budging.

If we are to teach the epistemology of social construction, we have to present truth as a shifting thing. But truth doesn't shift easily and one person's truth doesn't embrace everybody. Furthermore, it is in those sites where we don't agree where we need to have the most discussion. And ultimately, we must acknowledge that when a truth shifts, it does so slowly. Afterall, it took me several years to be able to "hear" the critiques the journal reviewers gave me: I had to first give up my sense of what was "true" and "right," and then I had to negotiate with the reviewers' comments until I felt that I had accounted for some of their perspectives in my new understandings. As teachers, we may not be able to

"convert" anyone in a one-semester class: we may not persuade our students to see the world as socially constructed, and we may not convince our students that "gender" is a social construct. But we should not despair about that. We have to recognize that one of the tenants of social construction is that when we are reconsidering ideas, we are left in an ambiguous place. If there is nothing else that we model to our students, I think we need to model that moment of ambiguity: that ability to leave questions raised but unanswered, that ability to listen to opposing views without choosing a side, that ability to speak passionately about one's position while acknowledging that perhaps, somewhere down the line, that position might change. When we can model this, we can provide a place where students can feel encouraged to speak and even to engage in conflict without simultaneously feeling that each conflict will have a winner and a loser.

Let me close with the final two "I Believes" from the list I shared with my students. It is the paradox I describe here that we need to embrace if we are to develop a classroom which is safe and which embraces conflict--a classroom which will embody of social construction and which meets the needs of the women students described in Women's Ways of Knowing.

> *I believe* that a belief is a construction that thrives through interaction. It transforms itself daily, weekly, yearly; with each pollinating bee, with each droplet of nectar, with each disease dusted from the soft winds, knowledge blooms, rests, dies, and sprouts again.
>
> *I must believe; I must believe firmly, thoroughly, passionately about things.* Despite the sense that perhaps, someday, the roots of each beliefs will be twisted and snapped, I go on daily trusting that the plant will be as sturdy tomorrow as today. This is a paradox I accept now and forever.

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